

Churches are under fire and don't see the fight coming

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=5814>

Last year, an Hispanic congregation made an offer to buy an old restaurant in the city of Burbank, Illinois, hoping to convert it to use as a church. As a result, the city passed a new ordinance that banned churches from commercial areas of their city.

According to an article in Christianity Today, the church's attorney said that "churches do not realize the fight they're in. If you go into a commercial district, they say you are wrecking their tax base. If you go into residential, they say you're disturbing the peace."

It's a disturbing trend, it is just getting worse. And it is bound to do so as long as cities continue to suffer from the bad economy, bad fiscal policies or growing intolerance to Christianity.

The article quoted Eric Rassbach of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty: "There are many, many more cases where municipalities are trying to zone out churches to keep their property on the tax rolls. I would suspect it's related to the economy because of tighter budgets for local governments."

The excuse list for denying a church's right to build or to extract money from churches continues to grow longer as well. One city is trying to pass an ordinance that will require the church to be on a minimum sized street; another has imposed drainage fees; others deny permits because the church might locate close to an area that can sell alcohol, and it might prevent the alcohol sales and related revenue.

Many churches, especially larger churches, are going to a home group model of meeting in addition to the use of their church facilities. But this is coming under closer scrutiny by cities who want to regulate where churches can meet, enacting rules that limit how many people can meet in a person's home. Why is there always a complaint when a group of people meet in someone's home to study the Bible, but no one complains about the regular Monday night football events held in homes?

And oddly enough, a church that was purchased in Portland and converted to a drama theater is losing its permit because of an ordinance that said that if a church was not used for religious purposes for five years, the property lost its right to be used as a place of assembly. If the traffic and noise of a neighborhood church is objectionable, you would expect the same objection for a theater, but in this case you would be wrong. The neighbors want the theater to stay.

Several years ago, an inspector for the City of San Diego fined a pastor for holding a Bible study in his home. Fortunately, the city reversed the fine. The City of San Juan Capistrano recently fined a homeowner \$300 for holding a Bible study in their home, or more specifically for violating an ordinance prohibiting meetings of more than three people without a permit. It was also reversed, but that hasn't discouraged attempts by others.

In Hollywood, Florida, a synagogue requested a permit to meet in two homes, but was denied, and in Northville, Michigan, a Catholic church was fined for holding masses and Bible studies in a home. It was also dropped, but the lawsuit they filed to stop further fines was rejected by the court.

A church in Olympia, Washington, lost the use of part of its property after their attempt to expand their facilities and parking drew the attention of environmentalists claiming their property was a wetland. Not only can they not expand their facilities, the land in question has become worthless.

In another case, a property owner in an agricultural area is attempting to sell a 25-acre tract of land to a church that intends to develop only about ten acres in the center of the property, leaving the perimeter undeveloped as a buffer to neighboring properties. But neighbors insist that would wreck their efforts to maintain the area as residential.

There is a growing perception that churches are a drain on their communities finances and do not pay their fair share of community development and maintenance costs, but in fact churches pay for building permits, development of infrastructure that serves their property, and use of utilities. The only things they do not pay are property and sales taxes. However, they give back to the community in ways that many or most local businesses do not, whether it be financially or in services to the community. If lack of taxation is the real reason for zoning churches out of cities, why don't cities demand that businesses give back to the community in the same way that churches do?

Churches need to wake up to the double standards being used on them to exclude them from their communities, and until the hearts and minds are changed, they can expect the discrimination to continue.

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